

Crucial Conversations

Tools for Talking When Stakes are High

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1. What's a Crucial Conversation?

- a. A discussion where: 1) the stakes are high, 2) opinions vary and 3) emotions run strong.
- b. Authors' claim: Master your crucial conversations and you'll kick-start your career, strengthen your relationships, and improve your health.

2. Mastering Crucial Conversations – *The Power of Dialogue*

- a. When it comes to risky, controversial, and emotional conversations, skilled people find a way to get all relevant information out in the open.
- b. **Definition of dialogue:** The free flow of relevant information. People openly and honestly express their opinions, share their feelings and articulate their theories even when their ideas are controversial or unpopular.
- c. **Filling the Pool of Shared Meaning**
 - i. Each of us enters conversations with our own opinions, theories and experiences which propel our every action.
 - ii. When two or more of us enter crucial conversation we don't share the same pool. Our opinions differ.
 - iii. People who are skilled at dialogue do their best to make it safe for everyone to add their meaning to the shared pool. They do their best to ensure that all ideas find their way into the open.
 - iv. As the Pool of Shared meaning grows, it helps people in two ways:
 1. Individuals are exposed to better information, making better choices.
 2. As they begin to understand the different proposals, they build off one another. Eventually, they come up with an alternative that no one had originally thought of but that all wholeheartedly support.
 - v. The Pool of Shared Meaning is the birthplace of synergy.

- vi. Conversely, when people aren't involved, they sit back quietly during touchy conversations and rarely commit to the final decision. Since their ideas are never expressed they end up quietly criticizing and passively resisting.
- vii. We have to develop the tools that make it safe for them to discuss their ideas so they can be added to the shared pool of meaning.

3. Start with Heart – Stay Focused on What You Really Want

a. **Work on Me First –**

- i. Those best at dialogue realize that they contribute to the problem, not just the other person.
- ii. However the only person you can directly control is yourself.

b. **Focus on What You Really Want** – When you find yourself slipping out of dialogue, into silence or violence, stop and ask yourself:

- i. What do I *really* want for myself? For others? For the relationship?"
- ii. And finally ask: "How would I behave if this were what I really wanted?"

c. **Refuse the Sucker's Choice** – As you consider what you want, notice when you start talking yourself into a Sucker's Choice.

- i. Watch to see if you're telling yourself that you must choose between false choices.
- ii. Break free of these either/or choices into a search for the all-important and ever-elusive *and*.
- iii. Clarify what you don't want, add it to what you do want, and ask your brain to start searching for healthy options to bring you to dialogue.

4. Learn to Look – *How to Notice When Safety Is at Risk*

- a. When caught up in crucial conversations, it's difficult to see exactly what's going on and why. When a discussion starts to become stressful, we often end up doing the exact opposite of what works.
- b. **Silence and Violence** – occurs when people don't feel safe.
 - i. Silence consists of any act to purposely withhold information from the pool of meaning as a way to avoid potential problems. Three common forms of silence:

1. *Masking* – understating or selectively showing our opinions, e.g. sarcasm and sugarcoating.
 2. *Avoiding* – steering completely away from the sensitive subject.
 3. *Withdrawing* – pulling out of the conversation altogether.
- ii. Violence consists of any verbal strategy that attempts to convince, control or compel others to your point of view. It violates safety by trying to force meaning into the pool. Three common forms of violence:
1. *Controlling* – it's done through either forcing your views on others or dominating the conversation.
 2. *Labeling* – putting a label on people (idiot) or ideas (stupid) so we can dismiss them outright.
 3. *Attacking* – you've moved from winning the argument to making those who disagree suffer.
- c. To break from this insidious cycle, Learn to Look.
- i. Look for the moment a conversation turns crucial.
 - ii. Look to see if others are moving toward silence or violence.
 - iii. Look for outbreaks of your Style Under Stress.

5. Make It Safe

- a. **Step Out** – When others move to silence or violence, step out of the conversation and Make It Safe.
 - i. Simply say, “It seems like we’re both trying to force our view. I commit to stay in this discussion until we have a solution both of us are happy with.”
 - ii. When safety is restored, go back to the issue at hand and continue the dialogue.
- b. **Decide Which Condition of Safety is at Risk**
 - i. *Mutual Purpose*. Do others believe you care about working towards a common goal? Do they trust your motives?
 - ii. *Mutual Respect*. Do others believe you respect them?
- c. **Apologize When Appropriate** – when you have clearly violated respect, apologize.

- d. **Contrast to Fix Misunderstanding** – When others misunderstand your intent, use Contrasting. Start with what you don't intend or mean. Then explain what you do intend or mean.
- e. **CRIB to Get to Mutual Purpose** – When you are at cross-purposes, use four skills to get back to Mutual Purpose:
 - i. *Commit to seek Mutual Purpose.* Make a unilateral public commitment to stay in the conversation until the issue is solved to everyone's satisfaction.
 - ii. *Recognize the purpose behind the strategy.* Ask people why they want what they're are pushing for.
 - iii. *Invent a Mutual Purpose.* See if you can invent a higher purpose that is more motivating than the ones that keep you in conflict.
 - iv. *Brainstorm new strategies.*

6. Master My Stories – *How to Stay in Dialogue When You're Angry, Scared, or Hurt*

- a. **He Made Me Mad!** – How many times have you said it?
 - i. Emotions are not foisted upon you by others. Others don't make you mad. You make you mad.
 - ii. Once you've created your emotions, you either find a way to master them or fall hostage to them.
- b. **Three Responses to Your Emotions**
 - i. The worst at dialogue are hostages to their emotions, and they don't even know it.
 - ii. The good at dialogue realize that if they don't control their emotions, matters will get worse. They choke down their emotions and try to get back to dialogue.
 - iii. The best at dialogue act *on* their emotions. That is, when they have strong feelings, they influence their emotions by thinking them out. As a result, they choose their emotions making it possible to choose behaviors that create better results.
- c. **Stories Create Feelings**
 - i. Just after we observe what others do and just before we feel some emotion about it, we tell ourselves a story.

- ii. Stories explain what's going on. They tell you also how you are to judge all this. Is this a good thing or a bad thing?
 - iii. Finally a story might include what you should do about all this?
 - iv. Storytelling happens blindingly fast, even if you don't realize you are doing it.
 - v. If we take control of our stories, they won't control us. If you want improved results from your crucial conversations, change the stories you tell yourself.
- d. **Retrace Your Path** – To slow down the storytelling process and the subsequent flow of adrenaline, retrace your Path to Action – one element at a time. Stop what you are doing. Then get in touch with why you are doing it. Here's how to retrace your path:
- i. *[Act] Notice your behavior.* Am I using some form of silence or violence?
 - ii. *[Feel] Get in touch with your feelings.* What emotions are encouraging me to act this way?
 - iii. *[Tell Story] Analyze your stories.* What story is creating these emotions? Abandon your absolute certainty by distinguishing between hard facts and your invented story.
 - iv. *[See/hear] Get back to the facts.* What evidence do I have to support this story? Watch for clever stories. Victim, Villain, and Helpless Stories top the list.
- e. **Tell the Rest of the Story** – Once we've learned to recognize clever stories, we can move to the final Master My Stories skill by telling a useful story. A useful story creates emotions that lead to dialogue. This is done by:
- i. *Turning victims into actors.* Am I pretending not to notice my role in the problem?
 - ii. *Turning villains into humans.* Why would a reasonable, rational, and decent person do that?
 - iii. *Turning the helpless into the able.*
 - 1. What do I really want? For others? For the relationship?
 - 2. What would I do right now if I really wanted these results?

7. STATE My Path – *How to Speak Persuasively Not Abrasively*

- a. How can we speak the unspeakable and still maintain respect? It can be done when you blend confidence, humility and skill.
- b. When you have a tough message to share, or when you are so convinced of your own rightness that you may push too hard, remember to STATE your path:
 - i. *Share your facts.* Earn the right to share your story by starting with the facts. Facts lay the groundwork for all delicate conversations.
 - ii. *Tell your story.* Why share your story in the first place? Because the facts alone are rarely worth mentioning. It's the facts plus the conclusion that call for a face-to-face discussion.
 - iii. *Ask for others' paths.* Encourage others to share both their facts and their stories.
 - iv. *Talk tentatively.* State your story as a story – don't disguise it as a fact. For example:
 1. "I was wondering why..."
 2. "Perhaps you were unaware..."
 3. "In my opinion..."
 - v. *Encourage testing.* Make it safe for others to express differing or even opposing views.

8. Explore Other's Paths – *How to Listen When Others Blow Up or Clam up*

- a. We must get others to share their path by active listening. We must listen in a way that makes it safe for others to share intimate thoughts and in a way that shows them they won't be punished for speaking frankly.
- b. **Four power listening tools remembered by the acronym AMPP**
 - i. *Ask to Get Things Rolling.* Invite them to express themselves. Common invitations:
 1. I'd like to get your opinion on this.
 2. Don't worry about hurting my feelings. I really want to hear your thoughts.

- ii. *Mirror to Confirm Feelings*. Mirroring is describing how they look or act. It is very important that our tone of voice indicates that it is OK to share their feelings. Examples of mirroring:
 - 1. You say you're okay, but by the tone of your voice you seem upset.
 - 2. You look nervous. Are you willing to confront him?
- iii. *Paraphrase to Acknowledge the Story*. Put the message you've just heard in your own words. Do it calmly to make it safe for them.
- iv. *Prime When You're Getting Nowhere*. On occasions the other person may not be willing to share. When that happens you need to prime the pump, i.e., sometimes you need to offer your best guess at what the other person is thinking or feeling in hopes they will open up.

9. Move to Action – *How to Turn Crucial Conversations into Action and Results*

- a. Turn your successful crucial conversations into great decisions and united action by avoiding the two traps of:
 - i. Unclear expectations about how decisions will be made.
 - ii. Doing a poor job of acting on the decisions they do make.
- b. **Decide How to Decide**
 - i. *Command*. Decisions are made without involving others.
 - ii. *Consult*. Input is gathered from the group and then a subset decides.
 - iii. *Vote*. An agreed-upon percentage swings the decision.
 - iv. *Consensus*. Everyone comes to an agreement and then supports the final decision.
- c. **Finish Clearly**
 - i. Determine who does what by when.
 - ii. Make the deliverables crystal clear.
 - iii. Set a follow-up time.
 - iv. Record the commitments and then follow up.
 - v. Finally, hold people accountable to their promises.